Exploring the relationship between local hockey franchises and tourism development ☆

Daniel S. Mason *, Gregory H. Duquette

Faculty of Physical Education & Recreation, W1-16G Van Vliet, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6H 2G9

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines six Western Canadian communities in order to explore how existing local hockey franchises have been used for tourism development purposes. Themes emerging from interviews with 24 prominent members of the communities, including tourism and economic development officers, team owners and managers, arena operators, and mayors, are discussed. Efforts made by select local business owners and operators are outlined. While franchises are considered integral parts of their local communities that generate significant exposure, they remain an untapped tourism development opportunity. The discussion revisits the literature on small cities and tourism development. Recommendations are then made to develop more comprehensive, city-initiated development strategies that emphasize the team's importance as a winter activity that celebrates the sport and local culture.

1. Introduction

As budgets are reduced and operating costs increase, many cities have increasingly turned to tourism (Hall, 1992; Higham & Hinch, 2003; Ritchie, Mosedale, & King, 2002) and other consumption-based activities that focus on a city's image as a selling point (Burbank, Andranovich, & Heying, 2001). Consequently, cities are becoming more reliant on the tourism industry generally, and sport tourism specifically (Gibson, 1998; Judd, 2003; Whitson & Macintosh, 1996). Within this context, sport has emerged as a means to modify the image of a place (Smith, 2005) and draw visitors by serving two important roles: (1) attracting participants and spectators; and (2) giving exposure to the host destination through advertising and media coverage (Chalip, Green, & Hill, 2003). Sport tourism can occur both *passively* (by attending sporting events and museums) or *actively* (by engaging in the activity itself, such as golfing) (Ritchie & Adair, 2002). Further, Gibson defined sport tourism as "leisure-based travel that takes individuals temporarily outside of their home communities to participate in physical activities, to watch physical activities, or to venerate attractions associated with physical activities" (Gibson, 1998, p. 49).

In the case of spectator sport, tourists visit communities to watch a series of sporting events, including local teams. As recognized by Higham, "treating regular season or sport team tours as an 'event' is a recent occurrence" (Higham, 1999, p. 89), and "the management implications of consciously treating sport as a tourist attraction are yet to be comprehensively explored" (Higham, 2005, p. 238). In addition, research that has examined sporting events has tended to focus on larger cities—so-called major-league cities that host mega-events—where sport is a component of a well-developed local tourism strategy (Gibson, Willming, & Holdnak, 2003; Green & Chalip, 1998; Smith, 2005). As a result, the positive effects of sporting events of more modest scales have not been widely considered in the academic literature on tourism (Higham, 1999).

According to Higham:

> The manner in which sports function as tourist attractions, in reality, extends far beyond world championship sports competitions and hallmark sports events. Indeed it might be argued that all sports offer the potential to function in varying ways, and varying degrees, as tourist attractions (Higham, 2005, p. 239).

To address this issue, the following paper explores how selected Canadian cities have used the presence of existing local hockey franchises for tourism development purposes. Canadian hockey was chosen as a focus, as according to Hinch (2006, p. 27), "the culture of sport shapes the place identity of Canada and it has therefore become a significant focus for commodification by the

tourism industry." In addition, other research has recognized that "an opportunity exists for CHL [Canadian Hockey League] teams and their respective communities to leverage the well-established links between hockey and community for economic purposes" (Mason, Duquette, & Scherer, 2005, p. 269).

As Higham further explained, "sports may be an important part of the suite of attractions at a tourist destination, although sports have rarely been conceived and managed as such" (Higham, 2005, p. 258). This may be particularly important when considering locally based sports (Hinch, 2006). Thus, the current study sought to initially examine the role—if at all—local Canadian hockey teams play in a city's broader tourism development strategy. More specifically, the study sought the insights of those involved with teams and arenas, and the operation and branding of cities, in order to determine if the presence of a team represented an opportunity for furthering tourism initiatives within the host cities.

1.1. The Canadian Hockey League

The choice of hockey franchises is related to their prominence as entertainment products within their respective communities and the Canadian Hockey League (CHL)'s recent growth as a sport commodity. "In communities across Canada, attending hockey games remains a focal point for social activity, where attending a game can remain the thing to do on a cold, winter night (especially in the absence of other entertainment options)" (Mason et al., 2005, p. 264). Games are played by 16–21 year old males, and the league serves two overarching purposes: (1) to act as an entertainment product; and (2) serve as a developmental (or feeder) league for the elite professional circuit, the National Hockey League (NHL), where over 50% of NHL rosters are comprised of former CHL players. In terms of attendance, the CHL is the number one spectator sport in Canada (CHL, 2004). Teams are located in 51 Canadian communities, and represent the premier sport/entertainment attraction in the majority of these cities. In most cases, the local CHL team represents the highest-calibre sport competition, in the largest entertainment facility in the city. Several exceptions include Toronto, Calgary, Ottawa, and Vancouver—these cities also host NHL and/or Canadian Football League (CFL) franchises.

In addition, hockey remains an important part of the cultural fabric of many Canadian communities (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993; Mason, 2002; Scherer & Jackson, 2004), and in some CHL teams have become prominent local institutions. As a result, the success of the local CHL team represents a source of civic pride and a vehicle for civic boosterism that is closely linked to civic identity (Duquette & Mason, 2004). For those who may be interested in engaging in a local experience, going to a game would be a desirable leisure activity, capturing the local flavor of the community. Each franchise has a distinctive history, with varying degrees of financial and competitive successes.

2. Method

The current research was part of a larger study examining six Western Canadian communities and the relationships cities had with their respective CHL franchises. The CHL teams in Western Canada play in a formal league called the Western Hockey League (WHL). The WHL has a total of 22 franchises, 17 of which play in Canadian cities (the other five play in Washington state and Oregon).

The broader study sought to determine how cities leverage sports franchises; the overarching theoretical framework focused on urban regimes (cf. Stone, 1993) and how business and political elites sought to use sport for economic development purposes. While urban regime theory has been used to examine tourism contexts (cf. Thomas & Thomas, 2005), the current study took a more grounded approach to examining the specific relationships between tourism development and local hockey teams. As a result, while the determination of informants for interview was guided by an urban regimes approach, the data collection and analysis process was more exploratory, with an effort made to gain the individual, unique insights of relevant informants (Sparkes, 1992), "seeking patterns of unanticipated as well as expected relationships" (Stake, 1995, p. 41). Thus, interviews were arranged with informants considered to be integral or peripheral members of a local city's regime, but the urban regimes framework did not drive the analysis and interpretation of the data.

A collective case study approach was employed (Stake, 1995). Of the 17 Canada-based WHL cities, two were not in existence at the time of data collection, and two others were located in cities with populations over one million. As a result, six cities were selected from a total of 13 communities. City populations ranged between 40 000 and 225 000, with arenas aged 5–30 years and featuring seating capacities between 3200 and over 11 000. During the season in which interviews were conducted, three of the teams finished with winning records and reached the league playoffs, while the other three did not. The two larger Canadian cities were excluded, as the impact that the local team would have on those communities would be insignificant when considered part of the broad array of entertainment and tourism experiences available. In contrast, none of the six cities selected had a more prominent or popular sporting franchise than the local WHL team. In other words, the WHL team represented the foremost sports attraction in the "suite of attractions" described by Higham (2005). Thus, it was thought that teams and facilities would be more likely to impact the overall tourism development strategies in their respective communities.

The approach taken to determine the number and selection of cities was deemed appropriate for two reasons. First, research in tourism has been criticized for not employing more comparative case studies (Page et al., 1999, as cited in Ioannides & Petersen, 2003, p. 410). Second, notwithstanding time and budgetary considerations, an attempt was made to select as wide a range of cities as possible, based on varying histories cities had with each respective franchise, team performance records, geography, facilities, and population. However, the authors acknowledge that:

> A collective case study may be designed with more concern for representation but, again, the representation of a small sample is difficult to defend. The relevant characteristics are likely to be numerous so that only a few combinations can be included (Stake, 1995, p. 5).

Despite this issue, Stake (1995, p. 6) recognized that, "Even for collective case studies, selection by sampling of attributes should not be the highest priority. Balance and variety are important; opportunity to learn is of primary importance."

Each city's facility also hosted a variety of different sporting events ranging from local or regional tournaments to national and international championships (e.g. Canada Winter Games, World Curling Championships, World Figure Skating Championships). In addition, arenas also served as the premier facility in the community for other events such as concerts, rodeos, conventions, etc. This allowed for questions related to the leveraging of not only the team, but also the facility. However, the WHL team remains the primary anchor tenant in each facility, with teams playing 36 regular season home games plus playoffs over the course of an 8 month season. Average attendance for games in these communities ranged from 2500 to over 6000.